DUENDE
An Invisible Symbol: Historical, Cultural, and Artistic Reflections on the Unseen

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Abstract

This essay proposes a critical, cultural, and artistic reading of the symbol *Duende* as an invisible and untranslatable presence that traverses histories, territories, and modes of perception. Drawing from historical and anthropological accounts of invisible beings prior to European conquest, the text examines the linguistic and symbolic transformations imposed by colonial frameworks and analyzes the contemporary distortions produced by mystical tourism, market logics, and social media dynamics.

Grounded in an embodied artistic practice developed through *La Casa del Duende* and *La Aldea Mágica*, this work advances a cultural defense of *Duende* as a living symbolic presence rather than a commercial product, folkloric caricature, or viral superstition. The essay situates *Duende* within a broader constellation of symbolic thought, engaging with philosophical, anthropological, and aesthetic perspectives articulated by authors such as Federico García Lorca, Mircea Eliade, Gaston Bachelard, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, alongside the author's own open-access research.

Rather than seeking to define *Duende*, this text argues for its restitution as a liminal force—one that resists commodification, escapes definitive language, and operates as a reminder of the irreducible dimensions of human experience. In an era dominated by algorithmic repetition and symbolic flattening, *Duende* emerges as a form of quiet resistance: a call to attend to what cannot be fully explained, but continues to be felt.

Keywords

Duende; symbolic thought; invisible philosophy; cultural decolonization; contemporary art; anthropology of the unseen; folklore and modernity; resistance to commodification; liminality; intangible presence

1. Introduction: Duende as Symbol

To speak of *Duende* is not to speak of figurines with pointed ears, nor of recycled superstitions adapted for contemporary consumption. To speak of *Duende* is to speak of a symbol that traverses cultures, historical periods, and modes of sensibility. *Duende* does not belong to a single religion or mythology; it is an intermediate presence, a liminal figure, a spirit of the threshold.

Duende inhabits the fissures between the visible and the invisible, the rational and the intuitive, the natural and the symbolic. It cannot be captured by definitions, nor sold with guarantees of effectiveness. It is a symbol that escapes unified discourse and returns us to an experience prior to language itself. For this reason, rather than asking what *Duende* is, we might ask what it provokes. *Duende* appears where control breaks down, where logic hesitates, where something touches us without permission or name.

This essay proposes an understanding of *Duende* as an archetypal manifestation of the hidden within everyday life. Far removed from infantilized folklore or esoteric marketing, *Duende* emerges as a mirror of human complexity, a reminder that not everything can be explained or monetized. It constitutes a rupture within the official narrative of the world—an invitation to pause before that which cannot be seen, yet is undeniably felt.

The word *Duende*, burdened with centuries of translations, distortions, and superstitions, functions as a container for multiple meanings. Yet beyond the word lies the experience itself: that moment when something brushes against us without explanation. An instant of strange presence, lacking logical justification, capable of traversing both the Andean farmer and the sculptor within the studio.

To recover *Duende* as a symbol is to decolonize the imagination. It requires listening once again to what the land, silence, and mystery attempt to communicate when we abandon the search for certainty. This text thus positions itself as an exploration of what *Duende* reveals when it is allowed to remain free, and of what we have done to it when we attempt to explain, capture, or commercialize it.

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2. Before 1492: Duende Without a Name

Long before the Spanish language expanded across territories imposing its vocabulary, cultures already spoke—through other names and other tongues—of invisible presences. Beings that required neither humanoid form nor pointed ears to be recognized. Presences that did not seek to be understood, but rather acknowledged and respected.

Within Hindu traditions, *yaksha* and *yakshini* functioned as guardians of sacred natural spaces. They were neither worshiped as gods nor ignored; instead, they were approached through recognition, care, and reciprocity. In the Arabic world, *jinn* represented an elusive

otherness—neither inherently benevolent nor malevolent—endowed with free will and capable of inhabiting the margins of consciousness.

In Northern European traditions, figures such as *kobold*, *troll*, *huldra*, or *wight* populated domestic and forest legends. At times helpful, at times dangerous, they remained fundamentally other. Crucially, their existence was not subjected to proof, but to respect. The question was not whether one believed in them, but whether one coexisted with their possibility.

In the Andean world, the word *Duende* did not exist. The symbol, however, did. *Wak'as*, *apus*, and *anchanchus* embodied invisible vitality present within mountains, rivers, trees, and stones. These were not caricatured anthropomorphic figures, but living energies endowed with personality and agency. They were, in essence, presences.

To name them through contemporary categories is to reduce them. Yet to erase them for failing to conform to modern language is even more violent. The issue was never the plurality of names, but rather their later erasure and forced unification under a single term: *Duende*.

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3. Conquest and the Word "Duende"

With the arrival of Spanish conquerors, new gods, norms, and hierarchies were imposed—but so too was a grammar of the world, a system for ordering both the visible and the invisible. Everything that failed to fit within European theological frameworks was labeled superstition, witchcraft, or deception of the devil.

Within this context, the term *Duende* proved functional. It allowed naming without understanding. It operated as a linguistic wildcard that simplified and erased complexity. Ancient tutelary spirits were thus renamed through a word derived from "dueño de casa" (owner of the house), domesticating what had once been free and altering its symbolic function.

This colonization of language was more profound than the colonization of bodies. By redefining the invisible, the relationship between Indigenous cultures and their environments was fundamentally distorted. The invisible ceased to be an interlocutor and became an object of suspicion. *Duende*, once subtle and relational, was transformed into caricature or threat.

As a result, many of the legends circulating today in Latin America regarding "duendes" represent unstable hybrids—forced syntheses between silenced ancestral knowledge and imposed colonial categories. Within these narratives, the symbolic is displaced by the anecdotal, and depth is replaced by spectacle.

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4. Art as a Vehicle for Duende

Where science seeks classification and religion seeks enclosure, art allows mystery to breathe. In this sense, *Duende* finds its most faithful vehicle within artistic practice. When creation emerges from intuition rather than formula, when something passes through the artist without prior command or guarantee, *Duende* is present.

As Federico García Lorca famously stated, "*Duende* is not a gift, but a struggle." Within the studio, there are moments of fluidity and moments of rupture. *Duende* cannot be summoned on demand. It manifests when imposition gives way to receptivity. As artists, we have learned to cultivate availability rather than control.

Through our experience as creators within *La Casa del Duende* and *La Aldea Mágica*, we have repeatedly witnessed encounters that exceed intentional design. Visitors who break down upon encountering a figure, sensing that they have found "something" without being able to name it. Others return years later, seeking once more that same vibration. This cannot be engineered—it can only be invited.

Art does not represent *Duende*; it embodies it. It does not explain; it suggests. It does not reduce; it amplifies. Each sculpture becomes a bridge, each figure a pause, each constructed space a threshold. In an age saturated with noise, this constitutes a form of resistance.

5. The Market, Social Media, and Symbolic Distortion

What conquest could not erase, the market absorbed. *Duende*, as a symbolic figure, has been emptied of depth and transformed into a decorative object, a social-media slogan, or a superstition accessory. It is sold with instructions, activated through purchased rituals, and packaged as an experience with promised outcomes. Presence is replaced by formula.

In places such as Baños de Agua Santa—though the phenomenon is far from unique—the figure of *Duende* has been trivialized through tourism operations and viral content. Small figurines with arbitrarily assigned names, videos attributing fluctuating powers according to trend cycles, and plastic superstitions wrapped in recycled fragments of New Age discourse proliferate under the guise of cultural expression.

This is not a matter of symbolic competition, but of responsibility. For a symbol to retain potency, it requires coherence. When trivialized, it becomes disconnected from its roots. The invisible does not disappear; it withdraws. The sacred does not die; it retreats.

The critique offered here is not moralistic, but cultural. Symbolic structures cannot survive without care. And *Duende*, if it is to remain a symbol, cannot be reduced to a slogan.

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6. Invisible Philosophy

Not everything that is true can be seen. Not everything that is real can be touched. This is the domain of what we may call invisible philosophy: a mode of thought that does not seek to

dominate the unseen, but to coexist with it. *Duende* does not offer answers; it generates questions.

This philosophical orientation rejects both religious dogma and esoteric formulas. It does not seek comfort, but presence. Invisible philosophy is practiced in the studio, in the forest, in moments of pause. It inhabits the interstice between what we believe we know and what we actually feel.

Gaston Bachelard reminds us that space is not merely geometric, but emotional. Mircea Eliade teaches that the sacred emerges where time opens. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy insists that symbols are not to be interpreted, but embodied.

In *Invisible Philosophy* (Girolami, 2025), it is proposed that art should not aspire to explanation, but to resonance. That to create is to listen. That mystery is not a problem to be solved, but a substance to be inhabited. That *Duende* is not a character, but a presence.

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7. The Future of the Symbol in Algorithmic Times

We live in an era in which everything is replicated, yet almost nothing is remembered. Symbols are absorbed, emptied, and returned as trends. Yet a symbol is not a fashion; it is a structure of the collective psyche.

Algorithmic logic privileges repetition over depth. It rewards what entertains, not what transforms. Within this framework, the symbolic is rendered invisible. For this reason, those who continue to create from within the unseen are engaged in an act of quiet rebellion.

The *Duendes* of the future will not be the most visible, but the least domesticated. They will not inhabit catalogs, but paths. They will not belong to campaigns, but to searches. They will be those that refuse to be fully named and remain within the fissures of the system—much like art that does not seek an audience, but truth.

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8. Conclusion: Restituting the Symbol

To restitute *Duende* is not to define it, but to release it. To return its silence, its strangeness, its force. Not to defend it as a fetish, but to remember it as a signal. Symbols do not require protection, but they do require listening. And listening, in an age of noise, is already a form of resistance.

May *Duende* continue to elude those who seek to explain it. May it inhabit pause, fissure, and form. May it remain what it has always been: a mystery that calls without demanding to be named.

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